

Democracy in ACTION

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IN THE PUBLIC EYE

Department Profile: Public Relations and Outreach

As one can imagine, the Douglas County Election Commission deals with a great number of people: voters, potential voters, political parties, campaigns, candidates, and elected officials. Serving their needs is the province of the public relations department, which consists of Election Commissioner Dave Phipps, Chief Deputy Election Commissioner Lisa Wise, and Public Relations Coordinator Justine Kessler.

Together, they work to help those who need specific information or services, and to inform the public of the goings-on of the Election Commission.

"It's a daunting task," said Kessler. "We're talking about 300,000 voters, 250 elected officials, and hundreds of candidates each year. Making sure their needs are met can be challenging, but it's also extremely rewarding."

Phipps has been the Election Commissioner since 2005, when he succeeded Carlos Castillo, Jr. Wise was appointed Chief Deputy Election Commissioner just days prior to the 2006 Primary Election. Kessler has worked for the Commission since 1998, having started as a summer intern, and finally being hired full-time in 2003.

Together they work to put a public face on

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DOUGLAS COUNTY: NATIONAL TREND-SETTERS

You don't always think of Midwesterners as trend-setters, but the Douglas County Election Commission is quickly gaining such a reputation. By programming our own ballots, scanners, and other election equipment, plus printing all our ballots in-house, Douglas County has become the envy of jurisdictions from around the country.

Counties in Ohio, the State of New York, and the State of South Dakota have all contacted us regarding the work we've done. And as more people hear about what we're doing, we expect an even greater interest.

"It's exciting to be out on the leading edge," said Dave Phipps, Douglas County Election Commissioner. "You sometimes have to take risks to achieve your goals, and in this business, every risk is tremendous because of what is at stake. However, when your gamble pays off, it usually pays off big, which for us means we save over a million dollars over the next five years."

Douglas County is also setting a trend with a practice it's been using for nearly 30 years – drafting poll workers. In every other jurisdiction in the nation, poll workers are recruited by election officials or by the political parties. In Douglas County, some poll workers volunteer to work on Election Day, while others are pressed into service, just like jury duty. It's a practice that has other states looking on as a solution to some of their own problems.

"I've spent a lot of time on the phone with folks

from Ohio," said Phipps. "The newly-elected Secretary of State has proposed legislation that would allow Ohio election officials to do what Douglas County has been doing for years. They seem to be impressed with our results."

Indeed, most of Douglas County's workers on Election Day are now draftees. This gives Douglas County some very big advantages: a lower average poll worker age to deal with new electronic equipment at the polls and the ability to have plenty of poll workers available on Election Day.

"There are many jurisdictions that run short of poll workers on Election Day," said Phipps. "Douglas County never has that problem. We know, based on our previous experience, just how many people will respond to our notices, how many will show up for training, and how many will show up for work for the Election. We just plan accordingly."

So while people on both coasts like to think themselves the movers and shakers that influence all that happens in the country, we in the Midwest know that sometimes we get to be on the front edge of some of the coolest trends.



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ELECTIONS IN THE NEWS

May 2007:

Multiple Elections Conducted by Mail

While there are no scheduled elections for 2007, there is always the opportunity for a political subdivision to request to hold a special election. So far this year, two political subdivisions have special elections scheduled. The Village of Waterloo and Bennington Public Schools will both have special elections on May 15, 2007; however, the voters in these subdivisions will not be voting at their polling places this time, instead, these elections will be conducted by mail.

Conducting a special election by mail is not a new idea. Statutes were added in 1996 which allowed the political subdivisions to choose to hold a polling place election or an election by mail. In 2005, lawmakers revised the law so that the decision on how to conduct the election became the Election Commissioner's.

In making the determination of whether or not to hold a special election by mail, the Election Commissioner must consider several factors, for example, the election may only include issues and not candidates, the costs of conducting the election by mail rather than with polling places are reviewed, and there should be no other elections scheduled on that same day for the voters of that subdivision.

There appears to be benefits to holding an election by mail. First, depending on the size of the political subdivision, an election by mail costs less than a polling place election. An estimated \$2,500.00 will be saved for the Village of Waterloo and Bennington Public Schools special elections. Second, it is suspected that voter turnout will be higher since the voters will have their ballot delivered to them. Finally, an election by mail may be easier for voters because they will not have to schedule

to go to their polling place on election day.

The major difference between mail and polling place elections is, of course, that instead of voters going to their polling places on election day to vote, they receive their ballot by mail at their registered address. Voters also have a different deadline of when to return their ballots on election day. For a mail election, the ballot return deadline is 5:00 p.m. on election day instead of 8:00 p.m. for polling place elections. Regular voter registration and early voting deadlines remain the same. All deadlines for the Village of Waterloo and Bennington Public Schools special elections can be viewed on the next page in the Election Calendar section.



Commissioner's Corner...

A Message from Election Commissioner Dave Phipps



Dave Phipps
Election Commissioner

It's that time of year. The time of year when people constantly ask me the same question: "What do you do in your office now that there are no elections?" I like to tell them I spend most of my time lying on a beach, but since this is Nebraska, I don't think they buy it.

Actually, we're always pretty busy. Because of the way we've structured our office, we use a small number of permanent staff. This allows us to keep busy when times are slower, and allows us to use tempo-

rary and seasonal help when times are busy.

So my truthful answer to their question is that we get to work on all the things we wished we had time for during election season. We're revamping our website, creating a new intranet for our office, honing our database skills, perfecting our procedures, and of course entering voter registrations. Just because there are no elections, doesn't mean people aren't still registering to vote.

We are also having a couple smaller elections. The Village of Waterloo and the Bennington School District are both holding special elections on May 15th. We've had some rumors that other districts are considering special elec-

tions as well. So, while we're certainly not as busy as normal, it still gives us plenty to do.

This time of year is also a good time for the staff to take some time off. I know that many are planning some good vacation time to do all those things that get neglected because of our hectic schedules during election season. I'm constantly amazed at how much elections truly affect our personal lives as well as our professional lives. You really do have to love this business to stay in it. Otherwise, it just isn't worth it.

For me, I still would like to be lying on that beach, but I'll have to take solace in enjoying the beauty and wonder that is Nebraska, and await the craziness that lies ahead for us in 2008. It's great to be an election official!



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ELECTION CALENDAR

April 2007

25th – First day for Election Commission to mail ballots to voters.

27th - Deadline for mailed voter registrations to be postmarked.

27th - Last day to register at DMV, agencies, libraries, or with Deputy Registrars.

30th - First day to vote an early voting ballot at the Election Commission and first day for the Election Commission to mail early voting ballots.

May 2007

4th - Deadline for in-person voter registration at Election Commission, 6:00 p.m.

5th – Last day for Election Commission to mail ballots to voters.

9th - Deadline for early voting ballots to be requested and mailed to a specific address, 4:00 p.m.

9th – Deadline for voter to submit statement for replacement ballot by mail, 5:00 p.m.

14th - Deadline for in-person early voting at the Election Commission Office, 5:00 p.m.

15th - Election Day. Deadline for agents to pick up early voting ballots, 4:00 p.m. All ballots must be returned to the Election Commission by 5:00 p.m.

15th – Deadline for voter to submit statement for replacement ballot in-person at the Election Commission, 12:00 p.m.

INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

Douglas County hosted some international dignitaries prior to the General Election in 2006. Journalists from six countries were guests of the local Kiwanis Club of Omaha and visited the Election Commission, as did two representatives from the Japanese Embassy to the United States.

These visitors were interested in how democracy was actually carried out, and decided that the election office was the perfect place to find out.

“These were extremely interesting visits for us,” said Dave Phipps, Douglas County Election Commissioner. “They were here to learn about our processes, but my staff

and I learned a great deal from them as well. It was a terrific experience for us all.”

The guests learned more about our democratic traditions, and they spent time seeing how each of our policies was put into practice. Many were fascinated by the level of technology we used, but were also amazed that we still used paper ballots.

“I think they expected that we would use the latest technology out in the field,” said Phipps. “They were surprised that paper still served our voters so well, but when something works, there’s no reason to change it.”





Dave Phipps
Election Commissioner

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the office, making information accessible and dealing with specific requests as needed. Their best method of relaying information is this newsletter. Produced every two months, it

serves as a way to inform interested parties and the public of the activities of the Election Commission. However, the newsletter isn't the only method of reaching out.

"We do a great deal of public outreach," said Wise. "I know that Dave, Justine, and I visit all sorts of groups talking about a variety of topics, from voter registration to accessible voting for people with disabilities. We've tried to be a very active part of the community."

The Internet is another area that makes information more easily available to the public. It is an area that the Election Commission continually strives to make more and more useful for the general public.

"We're always trying to come up with new in-



Lisa Wise
Chief Deputy
Election Commissioner

formation that we can post on our website," said Kessler. "Whenever we get a call, letter, or email requesting a piece of information, we try to see if we can move that information out on our website so everyone can access it."

The Election Commission hosts one of Douglas County's most widely viewed websites, gaining thousands of hits during election season. Working with the Election Commission's technical staff, the public relations and outreach group helps ensure that any information that is needed can be viewed electronically, thus keeping the virtual office doors open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The public relations and outreach area also assists candidates for public office. Many candidates and officials must file their paperwork to be on the ballot at the Election Commission. Making sure they have all the necessary information, as well as other helpful pieces of information, has been a project Justine Kessler has worked on over the last three years.

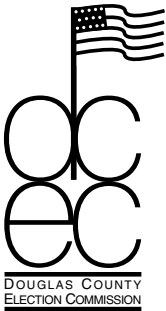


Justine Kessler
Public Relations Coordinator

Based on the comments from various candidates, her hard work has really paid off, because they have said that the process is much easier and more professional.

The final piece of the outreach pie is the work done by Lisa Wise. As Chief Deputy Election Commissioner, one of her main duties has been to help groups train deputy voter registrars. This program was handled in a very haphazard manner over the years, but is now finally coming to fruition.

Outreach and dealing with the public is an important part of all business and government services. Phipps said, "Many government agencies forget that while our job is to serve the public, it is also our job to make sure the public knows what exactly we're doing for them, and how we're trying to make things better. The group of people that I have working with me is extraordinary, and I couldn't ask for more."



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